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Building a Systems View of Strategic Discourse across Organizational Meetings

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Abstract

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore and expand the theoretical resources available to conceptualise organisational strategy meetings as a 'system', rather than as singular strategic events or episodes.

The paper begins by reviewing the Meetings literature to explore the existing theoretical guidance on conceptualising meetings as a collective and integrated set of activities, rather than as singular events in isolation of each other. The Systems literature is reviewed to identify concepts which may be adopted to enable a systematised view of meetings. The central focus of the paper is to explore the theoretical ways through which organisations' meetings could be conceptualised as an integrated 'system of meetings', rather than as single events. An outline of the empirical data source is then provided, along with the methodology adopted to record and analyse the data.

Meeting Theory

Previous research indicates the frequency and importance of meetings in formulating and implementing strategy (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, Johnson et al., 2006, Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). Yet meetings, particularly as they relate to strategy formulation and implementation, are considered an under-researched and under-reported phenomenon in organisational research (Hodgkinson et al., 2006, Schwartz, 2004, Johnson et al., 2006).

Research on meetings has taken a wide range of perspectives: Volkema and Niederman researched the use of written and oral communication resources for organising and managing meetings (Volkema and Niederman, 1996). Samra-Fredericks (2000b) used ethnographic recording of meetings and subsequently used conversation analysis to examine the micro discursive practices which make up the interpersonal interactions within these meetings. She invoked 'lamination' (Boden, 1994) to illustrate how micro discourse features may combine to contribute to the macro organisational environment (Samra-Fredericks, 2000b, Samra-Fredericks, 2003). The concept of 'episodes' from Luhmann's social systems theory is adopted by Hendry & Seidl (2003) to identify three phases within meetings (initiation, conduct and termination) to show how meetings can stand apart from but also be joined to organizational activity. A more systems oriented approach is adopted by Jarzabkowski & Seidl (2008) to analyse how meetings impact to stabilise or destabilise the existing strategy of organisations. Jarzabkowski & Seidl (2008) highlight how Hendry and Seidl's (2003) three phases of meetings establish them as distinct 'episodes' within the organizations routine activity.

A gap in the literature on meetings is evident in that meetings are generally conceptualised and studied as singular events or 'strategic episodes' (Hendry and Seidl, 2003). Limited attention has been given to studying and reporting on the inter-connectivity of meetings. As Cooren et al. (2007) put it

What seems needed is a study that pays attention to the detail of interaction while accounting for transportation effects, that is, the ways by which a given discourse manages to travel from one point to another (emphasis in original).

There appears to be an absence of systems oriented, meeting theory to inform the conceptualisation of meetings in a more holistic way, rather than as single events. This paper contributes to this aspect of the literature on meetings.

Systems theory

General systems theory (Meadows, 2009, von Bertalanffy, 1969, Luhmann, 2006) provides a foundation to identify the conceptual elements of a (general) system, which could be applied to a more specific theory to support the conceptualisation of meetings as a systemic, organizational resource.

In the specific area of organizational meetings, there is generally a deficit of theory to guide the conceptualisation of an integrated 'system of meetings'.

Systems theory and empirical research may be combined through the functional method of system theory (Knudsen, 2011). The functional method is used to identify questions to which empirical research may provide some answers. The empirical research and data may then highlight further questions, leading to the overall research taking on a non-linear, iterative format. Knudsen (2011) references Luhmann's concept of 'second order observation' in his social systems theory (Luhmann, 1996), which places communication ahead of action as the fundamental basis for the operation of social systems. In this context, the discursive elements interlinking meetings are particularly relevant and form the core of the theoretical concept of a 'system of meetings'.

Zott and Armit's (2010) activity system perspective on business model design provides an alternative framework to conceptualise a 'system of meetings'. Their distinction of 'design elements' from 'design themes' provide a useful framework from activity systems theory to inform the development of a 'system of meetings' theory.

Empirical data source.

The research setting for this paper is an SME comprising approximately 70 employees, with the following key functional elements – manufacturing, distribution, industrial sales, retail sales, wholesale sales, R&D and administration. This represents a diverse range of activities relative to the organisation size.

Unrestricted access to attend and record meetings in the organisation, from quarterly Board meetings to weekly operations team meetings, provides a rich data source comprising 100+ hours of recorded meeting proceedings.

The empirical data for this paper was electronically recorded at 44 individual meetings, from thirteen distinct groups within the participating organization, spanning a twelve month period. The data source is somewhat unusual in that it comprises the actual proceedings of multiple meetings and reflects both the depth and breadth of access afforded in the organization (Cooren, 2007).

Data analysis

Meetings have been analysed using different methodologies: such as Ethnography (Samra-Fredericks, 2000b, Samra-Fredericks, 2000a, Schwartz, 2004), Conversation

Analysis (Cooren, 2004, Huisman, 2001, Nielsen, 2009, Samra-Fredericks, 2003), Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak et al., 2011) and Discourse Analysis (Aritz and Walker, 2009, Duffy, 2010, Volkema and Niederman, 1996). These previous studies show how participants use multiple forms of discourse to interact in their meetings.

Informed by the forgoing, Discourse Analysis (DA) (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, Potter and Wetherell, 1987) was used to analyse the empirical data in this study and to inform the development of a systems based theory for organisational meetings.

The initial question guiding this preliminary data analysis is:

How do the strategic discourses within and between meetings enable them to relate to one another?

A preliminary review of the data suggests that the prolific use of meetings may over-use human resources while under-produce strategy output or implementation, relative to the time and effort invested. Initial data analysis shows an absence of clarity within the organization on how meetings relate or ought to relate to each other. It also shows how strategic activity spanning meetings in both time and function lack coherence and interconnection.

In general the meetings for each group in the organisation were planned and conducted as singular events or 'strategic episodes' (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). They were rarely if ever organised or implemented with other groups' meetings in mind. Where other group meetings were considered, it was generally in the context of accommodating the attendance of the same individual(s) at two or more meetings.

Abstracting from this preliminary analysis, broader problems are defined in terms of intra and inter-meeting communications of strategic relevance. Luhmann's view of communication as a fundamental component of social systems (Knudsen, 2011, Stichweh, 2000, Luhmann, 1996) supports positioning the problem of intra and inter-meeting communication within the wider social system of the organisation and enables the conceptualisation of meetings collectively as a system (Meadows, 2009, von Bertalanffy, 1969, Luhmann, 2006). In broader systems terms, the organisation represents the environment within which the meeting system exists. It further enables contiguous meetings of different functional groups to be conceptually viewed as sub-systems, in the context of conceptualising meetings as one holistic system within the organization.

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